

The Gore

The word “gore” has many meanings. The dictionary describes it as dirt, a piece of cloth sewn into a garment, or a triangle section of land. The Gore, in this area, is a specific section of land located between the old and new Pre-Emption lines.

In 1788, New York State extended only as far west as Seneca Lake. At a convention in Hartford, CT, December 16, 1786, New York State ceded to Massachusetts the pre-emption right, subject to native title, all the land in the state west of a line running through Seneca lake to Lake Ontario, except for a reserved tract, one mile wide along the east bank of the Niagara River. This gave Massachusetts about six million acres of land. The law did not permit anyone but the state to purchase land from the Indians. This did not stop certain men from trying to take possession. One, the New York Genesee Land Co., originated in Hudson in 1787 with John Livingston, Jared Coffin and Dr. Caleb Benton as managers.

In November 1787, the lessee company received a lease for 999 years of nearly all the Iroquois lands in New York State for an annual rent of \$200 and a promised gift of \$20,000. Governor George Clinton objected to this "deal" and sent messengers to the Indians to tell them they had been cheated. He warned all those who had bought property that they would not have a clear title to their land. In March 1788, John Taylor was appointed as Indian agent and the State Legislature passed an act to dispossess all persons holding title from the lessee company. Orders were given to burn their houses.

In September 1788, Governor Clinton called for a council at Fort Stanwix. He wanted to straighten out the matter by calling together the lessees, Indians and traders. Among those involved in the negotiations were Red Jacket, Cornplanter and Horatio Jones. The lessees did all they could to keep the Indians from attending. It was noted that at Scouyes (now Waterloo), a French trader named Debartzch, stopped the Indians, offering them whiskey and presents to keep them from attending the meeting.

Another man who had his fingers deep in the slice of “pie” known as The Gore was Peter Ryckman. Early records show that in April 1784, the New York State Legislature passed an act making Governor George Clinton president of a board of commissioners to head Indian affairs. The four commissioners of the board were authorized to appoint others when necessary. One those chosen was Peter Ryckman. Ryckman was very active as an ambassador for the commissioners and the state. He often visited the Indian castles at Oneida, Niagara and Kandesaga. It is quite probably that he realized the value of the land in this area during his visits to Kandesaga.

According to the terms of a treaty signed by the Cayuga Indians, a tract of 16,000 acres on the west side of Seneca Lake was to be conveyed to Peter Ryckman. Ryckman strengthened his claim by proposing to the State of Massachusetts that he and his partner Seth Reed be awarded this tract for services rendered to the Six Nations.

According to contemporary papers of that time, Oliver Phelps was extremely upset when he found that the Phelps and Gorham Purchase did not include the Indian village of Kandesaga.

Colonel Hugh Maxwell was authorized to survey the purchase. The preliminary survey was started June 13, 1788 from the 82-mile stone on the Pennsylvania Line. They continued until they reached Seneca Lake as a preliminary test for the survey line. The actual work of running the line was started July 25, 1788. Every six miles was marked off as a township. As Maxwell and his assistants progressed, types of timber, waterways and other pertinent information was marked on the maps. When the surveyors reached the area of Geneva, the line was carried along a route that is west of the present city of Geneva, on Bean's Hill, where the Ponderosa Restaurant is today.

Maxwell returned to Geneva on August 7, 1788. Other matters detained him and it is believed that it was during this period that the survey line was deflected and caused Phelps to lose the site of Geneva. Historical records place none of the blame on Maxwell. Poor equipment was listed as partly to blame. The fraud was laid on the shoulders of Reed and Ryckman, abetted by John Jenkins, one of the surveyor assistants. Oliver Phelps who was the owner with Nathaniel Gorham of what was called the Phelps and Gorham Tract said that, according to his records, the land they purchased from the Indians began at Seneca Lake. In 1789 a second survey was made under Robert Morris who had purchased the tract from Phelps and Gorham. This time the line went right through Seneca Lake and went north along a line which now divides the city of Geneva and Town of Waterloo in Border City. The old-Pre-Emption Line reached Lake Ontario, three miles west of Sodus Bay. The new line terminated near the center of the head of the bay.

Following the completion of the second survey, an act of legislation was passed March 24, 1795. Simeon DeWitt, the surveyor general, certified the second survey was accurate. The new pre-emption line was formally adopted.

The land in question—The Gore--consisted of 85,896 acres. Robert Morris paid about 11 or 12 cents an acre for it. On April 11, 1792, he sold it to Charles Williamson for 75,000 pounds. Williamson at the time was agent for most of what is today, Ontario, Steuben and half of Wayne Counties. Much of the land had been sold by the state and settled when Williamson as agent for Sir William Pultney took over the tract. The state settled with Williamson by giving him one and a half to six acres of public land for each acre surrendered by him in The Gore. Willimson gave up nearly 38,000 acres in The Gore and received nearly 57,000 areas of land just east of The gore along Lake Ontario in the presents towns of Galen and Wolcott. The town was named Williamson in his honor.

It is interesting to note that none of the available historical data has called attention to the fact that the section of land known as The Gore was also surveyed as part of the Military Tract. In the survey of the Military Tract, that section is divided into all of Lots 51, 64, 77, 87 and 88 in the Township of Junius and includes large portions of 1, 14, 27, 39 and 52. Research shows that the pre-emption line was first surveyed in September 1788. Further research shows that the survey of the Military tract was started in March 1789. Hugh Maxwell, credited as surveyor of the Phelps and Gorham Purchase is also listed as one of the surveyors of the Military Tract.

Headquarters for the surveyors of the Phelps and Gorham tract was located at the site of Geneva. Simeon DeWitt and his surveyors had their headquarters near the present site of the town of Tully.

Record books at the Seneca County Clerk's Office in Waterloo list 20 deeds relating to those lots now part of The Gore. Lot 51 went to Samuel Garritt, 64 to John Wills, 77 to Capt. John Otaawightow (an Oneida Indian who fought with the Americans in the Revolutionary War), 87 to Duncan Campbell and 88 to Jonathan Halleck. All those who received these lots were dead when the ballot was conducted. Most of the lots in Junius, Galen and Sterling were awarded to men in hospitals and heirs of those who had died while in service. Although it is was not planned in advance, their being deceased probably benefited the later purchases of the tract.

Some of the names listed as purchaser of part or all of each of these lots are listed as grantors on many of the military lots. Included among these were Samuel Broome, Gerrit VanWagener, William J. Vrederburgh, Benjamin Walker, Elijah Miller, Elkanah Watson and Aaron Burr. Also listed were Phineahas Prouty and Robert Troup.

Another interesting fact is deed transfers for Lot 88 were continued in the Seneca County records until 1851. Most of the others were eliminated from the records early in the 1800's. Lot 88 of the Military Tract is now the city of Geneva.

A final note was found in two writings of Elkanah Watson, one of the most renowned men of his time. He is credited as the founder of county fairs in the United States and as one of those most responsible for the building of the Erie Canal. On September 21, 1791, Watson wrote of a visit to Geneva during one of his western tours. He said, "Geneva is a small, unhealthy village with about 15 houses, all log except three. There are about 20 families. The accommodations were decent but sleep was difficult because of gamblers and vermin." In a letter written 27 years later, Watson said, "At Geneva I find an elegant and salubrious village, distinguished for its refinement and elevated character of its society."

[This article was written by Betty Auten, former Seneca County Historian.]